CHRISTMAS IN WARTIME SELSDON

Foreword: Further to the series in the Gazette about two years ago, our esteemed editor requests some recollections of Christmas during the war years. As it is difficult to turn him down, here are some selective memories of that time.

1939.

We were still adjusting to the new travails and restrictions since Prime Minister Chamberlain made his Sunday morning radio announcement on 3rd September. The most tiresome change was coping with the blackout. Those who lived through the period are unlikely to forget the nightly irritation of blacking out the house; in the early days, the pinning of black paper or cloth across the windows or the lining of curtains to make them light-proof. My father soon made black-out frames which clipped into position. Although these were more convenient, it was still a time-consuming chore to put them into place every evening and remove them next morning. Our main concern was not so much to make our homes light-proof against the enemy in the sky but against the over-officious air-raid warden or policeman on the ground. Care also had to be taken to douse our garden bonfires before dark. Because of the difficulty with blackouts, many churches altered the timing of their evening services. At St.John's, evensong was held at 3.30 p.m. during the winter months.

Travelling at night was potentially hazardous as the darkness was usually total. Cars were only allowed one shielded headlight and even dashboards were not allowed to be illuminated. Road accidents increased greatly. As pedestrians, we also had to identify and negotiate hazards such as lampposts and kerbs. The streets were the great battleground of the black-out. We were allowed to use electric torches only so long as they were screened with tissue paper and kept pointing downwards. Citizens with inflammable imaginations were quick to accuse black-out offenders of transmitting signals to enemy aircraft. It was a flattering tribute to the navigational powers of the *Luftwaffe* to suppose that it could pick out, from the heart of a dark island, a message in code flashed by a solitary light bulb. A small compensation was that, on clear nights, the starlit heavens were brilliant to behold. A further bind was that of having to tote around the little plain cardboard box containing one's gas mask. Although it was not mandatory to carry them, one could get fined for losing a gas mask. A

popular small Christmas present was a decorative cover designed to conceal the plain container.

A plethora of wartime regulations and restrictions had been enacted through Parliament. Although at that time I was not much interested in these, I recall my parents complaining about them.

When the air raids did not materialise after a few weeks, cinemas, theatres and other places of entertainment re-opened for business and were well patronised. Various public buildings was protected with piles of sandbags and the Croydon Town Hall was one of these. Looking over London from the heights of Selsdon or Sanderstead, one could see the myriad elephantine barrage balloons covering the capital. These, in a way, were a re-assuring sight.

It was a period later to be known as 'The Phoney War'. The British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) was based in France and we sang 'We'll Hang Out The Washing on the Siegried Line' (a ditty which came to be a rather a hollow boast some six months later.) We bombed some targets in Germany but mainly with leaflets! This seemed to us a rather pointless exercise.

The winter of 1939/40 was exceedingly cold and that Christmas was no exception. Few houses in Selsdon at that time had central heating, coal fires being the main source backed up by kitchen solid fuel boilers to heat the water. Bed clothes were supplemented by extra blankets and hot water bottles. One awoke in the morning with icicles on the *inside* of windows.

Food rationing at that time it was not too stringent. My mother was still able to obtain dried fruit for the Christmas pudding (Oh, the delight of scraping out the bowl afterwards!). Our Christmas Day dinner that year was a cockerel obtained from one of the local smallholdings. Christmas shopping was a dull affair compared with the previous year, mainly because as shop frontages were blacked out.. Local butcher Tom Ockelford's shop in Selsdon the previous year had been resplendently lit with displays of hung turkeys and other goodies. This year, one could only enter his shop after dark through a small door in his drawn-down metal shutters and this had to be hurriedly closed behind one.

Home entertainment, other than that self generated, was the wireless which was the focal point for news, music and variety shows. The infant television service had ended abruptly at the beginning of the war. I did not know of anyone in Selsdon who

boasted such an advanced entertainment device – after all there were only 20,000 in the entire country at that time.

Despite all the privations, spirits were generally high. We had not been subjected to the expected heavy bombing, nor had any major military conflict taken place. The German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* had been destroyed a few weeks before following the Battle of the River Plate in South America. All in all, Christmas 1939 turned out not too badly. It was fortunate that we were not able to foresee the events of the following twelve months.

1940

This was a complete contrast to a year ago. The 'Phoney War' had ended with a literal bang abruptly in May followed by the capitulation of France and the evacuation from Dunkirk a few weeks later. Then came the stomach turning realisation that we and our island were alone in resisting the bulldozing power of the *Wehrmacht* and their parachutists and jackboots were soon expected to be marching along the Addington Road. Local road signs and railway station names were torn down which made travelling more of an exploration. There was a local reassurance and great boost to morale when the Canadian 1st Division arrived to billet in the newly erected houses in Featherbed Lane and Palace Green.

This was followed by the mighty spectacle of the Battle of Britain above our heads, which began for us on Thursday, 15th August when Croydon airport was raided. Although we had not realised it at the time, Selsdon happened to be centre of the triangle bordered by three key airfields, Croydon, Kenley and Biggin Hill. This fact ensured that we all had a grandstand view of the daily battles overhead marked by circling vapour trails high above in the clear blue sky. Then, starting on the 7th September, the nightly bombing when for some seventy consecutive nights, we huddled into our dank dug-out shelter. In October, St. John's church hall was destroyed and the church badly damaged.

At Christmas time, food rationing had become more severe. Mother still made a form of Christmas pudding but used more substitutes. I recall grated carrot featuring in the ingredients. Brandy or whisky were in short supply but stout ale were poured into the mixture. (It still tasted good!).

There was a short respite from the nightly bombing over the Christmas period but on the 28th December, London had its heaviest raid when the City of London was

devastated and the famous picture taken of St. Paul's Cathedral outlined amid the flames.

1941

This was an period of extreme austerity. We had suffered military reverses in North Africa and the U-Boat blockade was at its height. Although America had belatedly entered the conflict following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour three weeks before and Russia had unexpectedly become an ally following the German invasion in June, there was little respite. In Selsdon, several well known faces of friends and neighbours disappeared as they were called-up to enlist in the armed forces or other services. There were several tearful partings in dimly lit and sooty railways stations.

In April, Selsdon experienced a major fire-bomb raid. Amid the hazard of falling shrapnel, opportunity was made of our skills in using stirrup pumps and smothering many of the flaming incendiaries with sandbags. Near neighbours lost their bungalow with most of the prized possessions. There was a further very heavy raid on 10th May. My elder sister, her husband and their eighteen month old daughter had appeared on our doorstep, their house in New Cross having been destroyed. My paternal grandparents also lodged nearby, having suffered similar bomb damage to their home in Thornton Heath.

All was not doom and gloom however. The nightly bombing had suddenly ceased in May and we were able to sleep soundly in our beds from that time on. Our enlarged family enabled us to provide mutual support to each other. The Christmas period was celebrated that year in this manner. Although food was short, our larder was well stocked with Kilner jar bottled fruit and tomatoes supplemented with much home grown and stored vegetables. All spare land in Selsdon and vacant plots on the smallholdings in Ashen Vale had been quickly turned over to fruit and vegetable production.

Home entertainment centred much do-it-yourself activities with games and other pastimes. My family maintained the Edwardian-cum-Victorian tradition of home music making on some evenings in the drawing-room (not then known as the lounge!). My parents, friends and relations played various instruments or sang. Not

least, my aged grandfather playing a nifty banjo! (All this must seem rather quaint today.)

Shortly before Christmas, Moore's off-licence small three-wheeled delivery van was in a head-on collision with a saloon car at the junction of Kingsway and Sundale Avenue. The delivery van shattered asunder and the air was full of flying bottles. My sister was passing-by with her young daughter sitting upright in the pram. Later, a full quart bottle of ale was found resting on the pillow. Many of the strewn bottles had strangely remained intact. Mr. Moore arrived to check the and collect any salvage. He was able to identify a precise number of wines, spirits and beer which had mysteriously disappeared. Some Selsdon households had evidently received an unexpected addition to their Christmas cheer!

1942

The year had started badly with the fall of Singapore followed by the occupation of Burma by the Japanese. We were not to know until very much later that this signified the end of colonial rule in the Far East, not only for us but also for the Dutch and French. The Allies were being hammered in all aspects and the U-Boat menace was growing more effective. Then, suddenly, the year ended on a brighter note with the victory at El Alamein. The church bells were allowed to toll in celebration. By Christmas time, it seemed that the tide was just beginning to turn in our favour.

In spite of the international trauma, the community spirit in Selsdon was extraordinary. The splendid dance hall over Bailey's garage was focal point for much Selsdon social activity. The local drama and concert groups were thriving with many raising money for charity. The horticultural society was also pre-eminent encouraged by the keen interest of growing ones own food. People related to and supported each other as never before. Selsdon Park Farm (where Aldi's store is today) was the Home Guard H.Q. and became their own community centre.

The Christmas decorations, such as they were, were re-cycled again and the dust shaken off. Some regeneration was possible only by buying some coloured paper strips and converting them into paper chains. A with a few friends from St. John's church choir, we put in several cold hours of carol singing. Not for us a few lines of 'While Shepherds Watched…' before knocking down the door but we performed at least two or three complete carols. These were generally well received and on some occasions we were invited indoors to perform complete recitals. This may have been

a sophisticated form of begging but we salved our consciences by partaking in the official choir performances for charity! The local churches were very well attended for the Christmas services.
Food was short but everyone made the best of things. Oranges and bananas had become mythical things of the past. But the home grown apple crop had been good!

1943

The tide of war had turned in the Allies favour but the effort and sacrifice was immense. As we toasted in the new year, there was a palpable feeling that the beginning of the end might be around the corner..

1944

This we were able to celebrate with more optimism then at any other year. D-Day and the invasion of northern Europe had begun in June. I was then working in London and was astonished by the large polyglot assortment of service personnel in the streets dominated by American G.I's. All entertainment venues did thriving business. A trip to the Vickers Armstrong aircraft factory at Castle Bromwich had introduced me to immense effort which was going into war production. Our relief after D-Day was quickly replaced by apprehension by the onslaught of the flying bombs a week later, followed in September by the V2 rockets. Every day, commuters ran the gauntlet to and from work realising that death or injury could come suddenly out of the skies for any of us. There was also no guarantee that if one did make it back in the evening that there would a home to return to. On 30th June, a flying bomb landed at the top end of Farley Road and demolished several houses and shortly after, one crashed to earth in Ingham Road.
The Christmas period was bitterly cold with severe frost, snow and pea-soup fog. A week or so before, the German army had broken through the American line in the Ardennes. Optimism that had been held in the summer that the war might be over by this Christmas was now dashed. The heroic failure at Arnhem had already confirmed that disappointment. But the new year toast was hopeful that the end was in sight for the war in Europe.

1945.

The seventh Christmas and the first one of peace. The war in Europe had ended in

May. A few weeks before, the hideous existence of Belsen and other concentration camps began to be revealed. The shocking scenes on the cinema newsreels confirmed that a great evil had been abroad on the Continent. The church bells rang out and there was dancing in the streets, There was a heady mixture of joy, pain, relief and sorrow. It was time for reflection and thanksgiving and church services were full. The war with Japan ended abruptly in August with the massive destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic blasts.

I do not recall that we had any great sympathy for the victims at that time nor a complete understanding of the future consequences.. There was only relief and the hope that loved ones who were captive in the Far East had survived and would return home.

As part of the public celebrations in Selsdon, my father had hung out a large Union flag. It had seen better days. My father explained that his own father had hung it out after the previous war. By the somewhat moth-eaten appearance, I thought it might be a relic of the relief of Mafeking.

Whatever, the lights were on again for Christmas after six dark, traumatic years.

1946 (As an after-war postscript.)

I had responded to the invitation by H.M. The King to wear his uniform of the Royal Air Force. (As he was somewhat smaller than me, it did not fit all that well at first.) At Christmas, I had been granted a week's leave from the Group H.Q. of Coastal Command in Oxford where I had been posted. (*Coastal Command?* Yes, Oxfordshire *is* nowhere near the sea!) Just as we were sitting down to lunch on Christmas Day, a telegram was delivered. Would I report back immediately to the A.O.C? As World War III was evidently imminent, due to the restricted holiday transport services,I returned by circuitous route via a seventeen mile bus trip from Reading, and trudged the two miles across the airfield to arrive at 2.00 a.m. (strictly forbidden in the daylight.) So not to disturb my sleeping colleagues, I tiptoed the length of the barrack room and quietly slipped into my bunk. In the morning , it was astonishing to find that I was the sole occupant! Adjourning to the mess for breakfast, there was clearly only a skeleton staff was on duty at the airfield (well, food was very short at that time.) Cycling the two miles to the Georgian farmhouse where the Group H.Q. was based, I was met by a by A.O.C's flustered P.A. She had the courtesy to flush and apologise profusely. It was all a big mistake, she explained. I could go back home

again. Not before respectfully requesting two day extension and travel warrants, ma'am, was my cheeky response..
So Selsdon received me again on Boxing Day. It was good to be home.

Postscript.

It was J.B. Priestley who later said that the British population had never been so good as during the war years and, perhaps, had never been so good since. For those who had the privilege of living through and surviving those years, they knew what he meant.

Raymond Rowsell